

## Chapter 1

I'd seen him angry plenty of times. I'd seen him dismissive, contemptuous, reproachful, and mocking too—and, more often than not, I'd seen that bad karma pointed in my direction. But in the thirty- four years I'd known him, I'd never seen my brother quite like this before. I'd never seen him scared.

David ran a hand through his ginger hair and knocked it from its slick alignment. He rose from my sofa and whisked imaginary dust from his spotless gray trousers and paced again before the long wall of windows. I shook my head, as much from the surprise of him turning up at my door on a Monday morning—or, indeed, any time—as from what I'd heard.

"Jesus Christ, David—on the Internet? What the hell were you thinking?"

He stopped to look out at the rooftops and at the sun, struggling up an iron January sky. Reflected in the window glass, his face was lean and sharp-featured—fairer-haired, lighter-eyed, more sour and lined than my own, but still too similar. At six feet tall he was barely an inch shorter than I, but he seemed smaller than that now. His smile was tight and bitter.

"Is this your usual approach with prospective clients—to interrupt their stories so you can exercise your own disapproval?" He flicked at a speck of nothing on the sleeve of his suit jacket.

The irony of him complaining about my disapproval was lost on David just then, but I fought the urge to point it out. Nor did I comment that he wasn't so much telling his story as wandering around the edges of it. I knew it would be futile. Unsure of what to do with his fear, and unused to discussing it with anyone, least of all with me, David was falling back on more familiar and reliable behaviors, like annoyed and patronizing. I'd seen clients go through it before; fighting didn't help.

David turned around and made an elaborate survey of my loft—the kitchen at one end, the bedroom and bath at the other, the high ceilings, cast-iron columns, bookshelves, and sparse furnishings in between. He pursed his lips in disapproval. "I haven't been here since it was Lauren's," he said. Lauren was our younger sister, and still the owner of the apartment. I'd been subletting the place for the past five years. "She did more with it," he added. I kept quiet. David wandered to a bookshelf and eyed the titles and smirked.

"Do people still read poetry?" he said. "People besides you, I mean."

I sighed, and tried to bring him back to at least the neighborhood of his problem. "You exchanged names with this woman?"

His smirk vanished. "First names only, and not our real ones. At least, the one I gave her wasn't real. I called myself Anthony."

"And she . . . ?"

"Wren. She called herself Wren."

"But now she knows your name—your real name."

David smoothed his hair and smoothed his steel-blue tie. "Yes. When I think about it, it wouldn't have been difficult. My wallet was in my suit jacket, and my suit jacket was in the closet or on the back of a chair. She could have gone through it while I was in the bathroom. I should have been more careful about that sort of thing, I suppose, but I assumed we both wanted anonymity. That is the point, after all."

"The point of . . . ?"

David lifted his eyebrow to a familiar, impatient angle. "The point of the websites. The point of using words like 'casual' and 'discreet' in your posts."

I nodded slowly. "You're pretty familiar with the conventions." David looked at me and said nothing. "By which I mean: I assume it wasn't the first time you'd used one of these sites."

"It wasn't."

"How many—"

He cut me off. "How is this relevant?"

I drained my coffee mug, rubbed the last smudges of sleep from my eyes, and counted to ten. "I don't know what's relevant and what's not. I'm still trying to get the lay of the land."

David sniffed. "Suffice it to say, there were other sites and other women."

"Were they all onetime things?"

He walked back to the windows. A few sooty snowflakes were drifting down onto Sixteenth Street. David watched them drift. "Some, and some were three- or four-time things. Wren was four times."

"None of the other women—"

"None of the others ever called me on the phone, John. None of them has shown up at my house. So can we drop them and stick to Wren?" His voice was shaky.

"You saw her four times, over what period?"

"Two months maybe."

"From when to when?"

"From October to December. The last time was about six weeks ago."

"When did the calls start?"

"New Year's Day. She left a message on my office voicemail."

"And since then?"

David turned toward me. Beneath the flawless Italian tailoring, his arms and legs were stiff as wire. His normally ruddy face was paper white. "In the past two weeks I've gotten four more calls at the office, three on my cell, and three at home. Four days ago she dropped by."

"Does she say what she wants?"

"The two times she's managed to get through to me she's said she wants to meet again. She doesn't seem to get the point of no."

"She doesn't say anything more?"

David examined his cuticles intently. "She says plenty more. I've saved a couple of the messages; you can hear for yourself."

"Maybe you could give me a preview."

He sighed impatiently. "She demands to see me; she won't be dismissed or ignored. It's a whole Fatal Attraction shtick. And she makes it clear that she knows where I work—not just my office number, but what I do and where. She mentions Ned, and threatens to call him if I don't get in touch with her." Ned is our brother, the eldest of the five of us. With our uncle Ben's retirement the previous June, he'd also become the managing partner at Klein & Sons—the head guy at the merchant bank our great-grandfather started a few generations ago. Which also made him David's boss.

"How are you supposed to get in touch with her?"

"The same way we arranged things before, by e-mail."

"What else does she say?"

David stared at me. His blue eyes were weary but they didn't waver. "She knows I'm married," he said finally. "She mentioned Steph-

anie's name, and a couple of events Steph had been at recently—

fund-raising things. She threatened to call her."

I nodded. That was more than a glance through his wallet, though the research wouldn't have been hard. David was a reasonably high-profile guy in some circles, and Google would do the trick. I recalled the mentions in the trade rags, last August, of David's promotion to head of mergers and acquisitions at Klein. Those articles would probably appear at the top of the search results, but Stephanie's name would come up too, along with a skein of social contacts.

"She's done some homework," I said.

Irritation rippled across David's face. "You think?" He stalked to the kitchen counter and picked up his coffee mug. He drank from it and grimaced and emptied it in the sink. "Cold," he said. He made it an accusation.

"Has she made good on her threats?"

"Do you think I'd be here if she had? There wouldn't be much point, would there?"

I counted to ten again, and then to twenty. I was getting good at it. I'd had a lot of practice with David. "Has she tried to make good on them?"

"Does her little visit to my place count? Thank God Steph wasn't home for that. Thank God I took care of the fucking doormen this Christmas."

"So Stephanie doesn't know about her?"

"No," David said. His voice was empty of emotion again. "And neither does Ned, and I intend to keep it that way."

A fine ambition, I thought, though perhaps not realistic. "Does Stephanie know about the other wo—"

"No, goddammit, and can we stick to the point here?" David's fingers were white on the edge of my kitchen counter. I was running out of numbers.

I took a deep breath. "What happened when you and Wren were together?"

David's look was a mix of irritation and "Are you some kind of idiot?" "What do you think happened? And if you're looking for details, forget—"

"I'm not. But did she say or do anything out of the ordinary—"

anything to make you think she had another agenda?"

"There was nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Conversation tends to be . . . limited, and that's how it was with her. She was maybe a little quieter than some of the others, a little more . . . inwardly turned . . . but that's all."

"And you didn't say anything to her? Anything that might lead her to believe—"

"To believe what, that we were going to run off together or something? Get a cottage by the sea and raise a new generation of Marches? Do you think I'm stupid?" It was one of many thoughts that were colliding in my head, and that I'd so far managed to keep to myself. But David wasn't making it easy. He jabbed his fingers at me. "And what happened to sticking to the fucking point?"

"That would be a lot easier if you would tell me just what the fucking point is. What is it you want from me?"

"I want you to find this Wren, for chrissakes—to find out who she is and where she lives. To find out as much about her as she has about me. And then I want you to talk to her. Make it clear that I have no interest in seeing her—or hearing from her—ever again. Make it clear I won't sit still for extortion or manipulation or . . . whatever the hell she has in mind. Make her understand there are consequences." His voice was shaky at first but steadied with talk of action. The fantasy of control over this sorry situation was short-lived, though, and worry filled the silence when his speech was done. His gaze, fixed on me, was more desperate than resolute.

"You have the wrong idea about what I do."

David snorted. "I know just what you do, John. You rummage around in people's lives—you go through their garbage and their dirty laundry. You find them, and you find out about them, all the things they want kept private, all the secret things. I know exactly what you do, and this is right up your alley."

"I don't do kneecaps, David."

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. There was genuine surprise in his voice. "You think that's what I'm asking for? Jesus—what kind of person do you think I am?" It was a good question, and I realized then that I didn't have a clue.

"What kind of consequences did you have in mind, then?"

"I don't intend to have my life overturned, or to have my pocket picked. If she won't take the hint from you, the next message will come from a lawyer—a high-priced, tireless, nasty one, with a taste for human flesh. That's the message I want you to send."

I thought about that for a while. "Assuming I can find her—"

"Assuming? I thought you were good at this."

"I am good at it, but there's nothing certain in this work. Assuming I can find her, and deliver your message, there's still the possibility that lawyers might not frighten her." David's face said the notion was unfathomable. I went on. "She might not have any assets worth going after, or—if she's nuts enough—she might not care. She might even like the attention."

A shudder went through him and he pulled his hand again and again through his glossy hair. "We'll burn that bridge when we get to it," he said finally. "First find her." He shut his eyes and pressed his fingers to his temples and looked smaller still.

"You could just let her find you, you know—just wait until she calls and agree to a meeting and send your message in person."

"I'm done waiting!" David said, and smacked his fist on the countertop. "I won't have this hanging over my head any longer, and I won't dance to her tune. If she calls, fine—I'll agree to a meet, and you can go, but I'm not sitting on my hands until that happens."

I carried my coffee mug to the kitchen and filled it and wandered to a window. David eyed me warily and I looked back. He was just two years my senior, but in the gray morning light, with the color wrung from his eyes and his expensive woolen skin hanging sadly from his narrow shoulders, he might have been a hundred.

"What is it?" he asked finally. "If it's money you're worried about— don't. I don't expect a family discount or anything; I'll pay full freight."

Full freight. Jesus. I shook my head. "There are other PIs in the world, David. Why do you want to hire me?"

"You think I like the idea? Trust me, I don't. But I like even less the thought of going to a total stranger. That's all I need right now is some sleazebag careening around in my life, upending things or . . . God knows what." David paused and the small sour smile came and went again. "You're at least a sleazebag I know. You're the lesser evil."

I looked at David and nodded. It was the first really straight answer he'd given me all morning.

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